

**Views from the East:
Public Opinion in Kharkiv and Dnipro**

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The results of Ukraine's presidential elections starkly reveal the depth of popular rejection of the status quo. In the second round run-off vote, Volodymyr Zelenskiy won 73.2% of the national vote to incumbent Petro Poroshenko's 24.5%.¹ Strikingly, a majority of voters in all of Ukraine's 27 regions except for one (Lviv oblast) chose Zelenskiy over Poroshenko. Does this outcome signify that Ukraine has bridged the east-west divide that has characterized Ukraine's recent elections?

The central reasons why Ukrainians voted Poroshenko out of office seem to be anger over the poor economy and decline in the standard of living, as well as concern over corruption associated with the country's political and economic leaders.² As one Ukrainian man implored me in the café car of a train traveling from Kharkiv to Kyiv in 2016, "You are an American. Can you please tell our president to stop living off the backs of the Ukrainian people?" Moreover, this economic discontent has developed against a background of extremely elevated expectations following EuroMaidan. By the time the presidential election occurred, Poroshenko served to both channel and absorb the disappointed hopes of many parts of Ukraine's population.

Given this common set of concerns with the economy and corruption among the electorate and Zelenskiy's electoral sweep of all but one region of Ukraine's 27 regions, should we conclude that Ukrainians are now less polarized along an east-west regional cleavage than they have been in the recent past? It is premature, I argue, to declare that political polarization has ended. The margins of victory for Zelenskiy were larger in Ukraine's eastern and southern oblasts than in its central and western ones. He won 87% of the vote in Kharkiv, Dnipro, Donetsk, and Odessa, and 89% in Luhansk compared to 50% in Ternopil, 54% in Ivano-Frankivsk, 63% in Vinnytsya and Volyn, and 60% in Kyiv (though 70% in Kyiv region). Why did Zelenskiy prove more attractive than Poroshenko to voters in the east and south and which issues divide the electorate?

In the short time that passed since the election, analysts and observers have offered various interpretations of what the vote reveals about public opinion in Ukraine. Some, such as Nikolai Petro, claim that it shows that Ukrainians reject Poroshenko's turn toward ethno-nationalism as well as his policies concerning the war and Russia. Petro argues that Poroshenko's policies and rhetoric "lost" voters in "Russophone Ukraine" who are sympathetic to Russia.³ Others maintain that as a result of Russian interference in Ukraine since 2014, Ukrainian popular opinion has become more unified and more oriented toward Europe than in the past. In an interesting variant of this argument, Oxana Shevel contends that Zelenskiy's pro-EU platform and popularity indicates that Ukrainians have decisively shifted toward Europe as a result of Euromaidan and the ensuing crisis. Unfortunately, exit polls asked voters *who* they supported, not *why* they supported their preferred candidate so we cannot definitively adjudicate among these interpretations. Nevertheless, by researching political opinion using survey data, focus groups, and interviews, we can begin to make sense of how people currently understand various issues and why they rejected Poroshenko. In this paper, I make a first cut at these questions by examining opinion data on foreign policy orientation in combination with statements made by ordinary citizens in focus groups conducted in Kharkiv and Dnipro. I focus

¹ https://elections.dekoder.org/ukraine/en?fbclid=IwAR0ndjl0Kx1mRhoUY-8yHyYu8_t-OHtdigtI4S7FtzxoFZnXiT_2hVk51Y0

² Opinion polls document that these issues were of central concern to citizens: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2019.1.30_ukraine_poll.pdf

³ Nicolai Petro, "Poroshenko's Nationalism Cost him the Presidency", April 23, 2019. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/petro-poroshenkos-nationalism-cost-him-presidency-53887>

on popular opinion in these two eastern cities in order to understand political attitudes in regions of Ukraine that have been less in sync with Poroshenko’s political agenda than those in the center and west. I conducted five focus groups in Kharkiv in the summers of 2017 and 2018. KIIS conducted five focus groups in Dnipro on my behalf in September 2018.

Opinion data from the most recent KIIS survey (February 2019) demonstrate that on the critical issue of European integration and NATO membership, there continues to be a difference in opinion across regions. Nearly half of Ukraine’s population (45%) supports joining the EU.⁴ This figure is only slightly larger than the 43% of the population that backed EU membership before Maidan in 2013 (a figure that included the current territory of occupied Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as Crimea). Thus, aggregate polling data suggest a small rise in support for EU membership. See Figure 1. However, attitudes toward the Russian-backed Customs Union (CU) have changed drastically since the crisis began. Before the crisis began, in 2013, a much larger percentage of respondents (35%) supported CU membership than do currently (14%).⁵ Also, there has been a corresponding rise in support for Ukraine charting an independent course in its foreign policy. In 2013, only 9% of respondents favored “joining neither the European Union nor the Customs Union,” whereas 25% backed an independent course in 2019. (This represents a slight drop from 30% of respondents in summer 2018.) Thus, while a majority of Ukrainians back EU membership, aggregate data shows that nearly as large a percentage of the population does not.

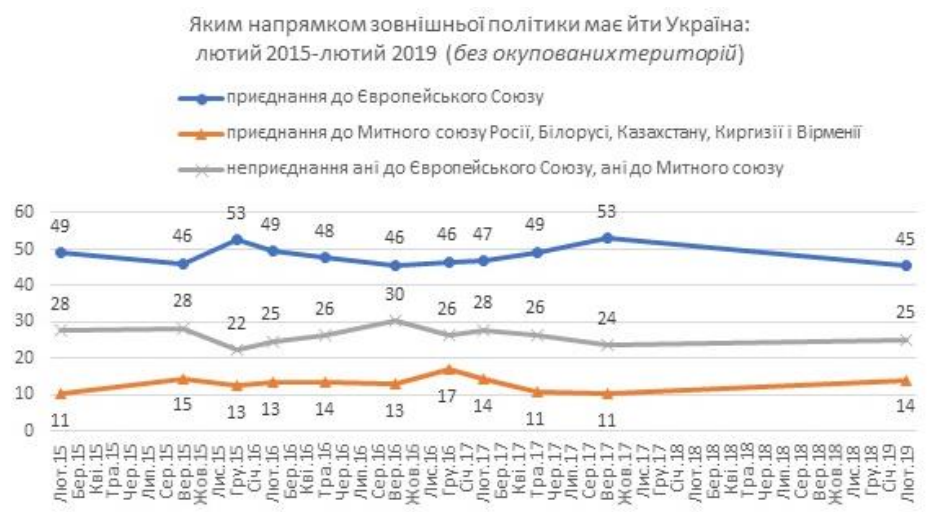


Figure 1
Which direction should Ukraine’s foreign policy take
February 2015-February 2019 (without occupied territories)

⁴ See <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=827&t=3&page=4>. This figure is slightly lower than the 47% recorded in a Summer 2018 KIIS poll.

⁵ In 2018, support for the Customs Union was slightly lower: 12%.

Breaking down the polling results by region, we observe that the divide in regional opinion on the issue of Ukraine’s foreign policy orientation persists. See Figure 2. Majorities in the western and central oblasts are pro-EU (with larger majorities in the west than in the center), whereas majorities in the east and south (33%) favor non-alignment with either the EU or the Customs Union. At the same time however, relatively large portions of the population in the east and south support EU membership: 21% in the east and 29% in the south. Similar proportions of the population there back joining the Customs Union: 27% in the east and 23% in the south.



Figure 2
Which direction should Ukraine’s foreign policy take?
by Macroregion (Feb. 2019)⁶

A similar picture emerges with regard to support for NATO membership. During the past several years, more people—in fact a majority—supported joining NATO than opposed it. See Figure 3. However, as with opinion on European integration, opposition to joining NATO is strongest in the east (60%) and south (52%). See Figure 4.

⁶ KIIS defines microregion as follows: *West region* : Volyn, Transcarpathian, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Rivne, Ternopil, Khmelnytsky, Chernivtsi regions; *Central region* : Kyiv, Kyiv, Vinnytsya, Zhytomyr, Kirovograd, Poltava, Sumy, Cherkasy, Chernihiv oblasts; *Southern region* : Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Nikolaev, Odessa, Kherson regions; *Eastern region* : Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk region (without temporarily occupied territories).



Figure 3
The population's readiness to vote for Ukraine's entrance into NATO, from 2014 to February 2019 (without occupied territories)



Figure 4
The population's readiness to vote for Ukraine's entrance into NATO, by Macroregion (Feb. 2019)

Thus, overall, polling data suggests that on the critical issue of foreign policy orientation, little has changed during the past several years. Attitudes in the east and south, moreover, seem to have remained relatively stable, opposed to European integration in large part, and therefore in disagreement with Poroshenko's agenda. In popular and scholarly accounts, eastern and southern oblasts are often referred to as strongholds of the pro-Russian Party of Regions, or alternatively, as "Russian-speaking", as if these labels capture a complete representation of the political attitudes of Ukrainians living in these regions.

In the remainder of this paper, I present some of my focus group material that challenge and complicate these labels and stereotypes and that provide insight into the polling data. The reality of opinions in the east and south is more complex than either the labels or the aggregate data suggest. The discussion in this paper focuses primarily on the issue of foreign policy orientation. However, I also briefly sketch some of the group discussions and statements concerning other issues in order to shed light on why Poroshenko was voted out of office. The research also suggests that stereotypes about Russophone identity and practice homogenize the political preferences of people and therefore misrepresent the situation in these cities.

Focus groups in Kharkiv and Dnipro

Survey data on attitudes in eastern and southern oblasts as well as the label "pro-Russian" and "Russophone" lead to expectations that citizens in Kharkiv and Dnipro maintain a well-defined set of political attitudes that consistently favor Russia over Europe and oppose Poroshenko's European integrationist and reform agenda, and/or all ethnically Ukrainian nationalizing policies. With regard to some citizens there, these stereotypes are relatively accurate. Especially during and after the Maidan and anti-Maidan demonstrations in Kharkiv, many citizens lined up on one or another side of the conflict and engaged in polarized debates with each other in marshrutkas or at the office. (Field research 2016 and 2017). Yet, we also observe that the attitudes and positions of Ukrainians living in these cities is quite complex and nuanced.

We opened every focus group session by asking participants "What do you consider to be the most important problems today for you personally, for your city, and for Ukraine?" Participants consistently mentioned two issues: the state of the economy/personal financial problems and the war. With regard to the former, people lamented low salaries, the difficulty finding a well-paying job, and high prices on everything from public transport to utilities. They often mentioned the fact of increased labor migration to Poland. In the words of one man who mounted an emotional appeal:

Why do we, the working class, so to speak, now suffer certain hardships? Of course, with the chin up, I'm saying "I'm a proud guy, I'll live on water and breadcrumbs, that's great." But I don't want to live on water and breadcrumbs. I give my energy, my health, my years, my hard work, my life for working in Ukraine. I don't plan on leaving this country." (FG8 _ IT)

A 30-year old woman went further, explaining her readiness to emigrate: "I don't see a future in Ukraine. My lawyer's salary is less than that of a cashier. Well excuse me. What is there for me here?" (P5, Dnipro-B). Even in a focus group of just young professionals who work

in the IT sector, all of whom were employed, the poor state of the economy and the difficulty in finding well-paying jobs was the issue that participants returned to again and again throughout the two-hour session. In many of the focus groups participants did not explicitly mention Poroshenko or other political leaders when outlining their economic grievances (there were some exceptions: in Dnipro several individuals repeatedly referred to the upcoming elections as an opportunity to change problematic economic situation and policies.) However, in all focus groups, the degree of peoples' frustration and anger with the status quo cannot be overstated, suggesting that dissatisfaction with the economy and concern with individual material well-being was a central reason why voters rejected the incumbent in the presidential elections. Furthermore, toward the end of each focus group, we asked participants about which current politicians they supported at either the national or local level. After the laughter subsided (a common occurrence in most groups), several individuals had opinions about specific politicians. Poroshenko received little praise, though some participants stated that they supported his foreign policy initiatives.

The other issue mentioned as the most important current problem facing Ukraine was the war. Participants were uniformly deeply upset by the war and its human costs. Nobody minimized its importance for Ukraine or considered it something that didn't touch their lives—perhaps due to the proximity of Kharkiv and Dnipro to Donbas, and to the high number of IDPs living in their cities.

All participants discussed the war in primarily humanitarian rather than political terms. Many did blame Russia (and Putin in particular) but many also condemned the entire political class for starting and continuing the war, explaining that they benefit from it. In answer to our question “What are the reasons for the war?” participants in one Kharkiv focus group answered, “money” and “war is business.” In some cases, people specifically invoked Poroshenko, sometimes stating that he can't solve the war. One participant said that he doesn't want to solve it; another stated that he can't because he is a puppet of larger actors and forces that remain behind the scene. (FG-Bar; Kharkiv).

The Language Issue

All focus group were conducted in Russian. The brief survey form we distributed beforehand that asked people about language-use and confirmed that Russian was the dominant language used by most participants. This fact did not indicate anything about the political orientation of participants nor about their specific attitudes concerning identity and language issues. Strikingly, nearly all participants across most groups supported Ukrainian language as the sole state language of Ukraine. On the question of whether Russian should have some kind of official status, opinions varied. Many argued that Russian did not need any kind of official status, while others believed that Russian should have the status of “regional language.” Many people wanted and expected to continue to be able to speak Russian. But most participants (even older ones) pointed out that they already spoke Ukrainian or understood it and watched television in Ukrainian, etc. Overall, language did not evoke strong emotions or statements among most focus group participants.

With regard to the new law on education that stipulates that the language of instruction in schools will be Ukrainian after grade five beginning in 2020, many participants seemed relatively ill-informed about the law. Others had heard of the law, but did not express strong opinions or emotions about it. Some thought that the policy was already in place given the spread

of Ukrainian language education in grammar schools. Certain people in their 40s, 50s, and 60s were critical about aspects of Ukrainianization or looked at the situation ironically. We know that statements made in focus groups cannot be interpreted as representative of the general population. Yet it is important to note that most of the statements about language were consistent with polling data indicating a marked nonchalance among Ukrainians toward language policy.

Similarly, nobody mentioned “Russian-speakers” as an identity category and few mentioned defending the rights of monolingual Russian-speakers. The opposite was true in some one-on-one interviews I conducted with professionals and specialists in Kharkiv. When asked about whether they perceived discrimination toward Russian-speakers, almost all participants agreed that none existed. As a rule, people simply did not connect new education law nor existing language policy in Ukraine to the idea of discrimination against Russophones. (There were exceptions; one middle-aged man, however, stated that the education policy was “already discrimination against the rights of future generations.”). It may be that concerns with Ukrainianization among Russophones are associated with the older generation since language learning and adaptation becomes more difficult with age. However, this hypothesis must be subjected to empirical test because throughout the region, generation often does not function to inform attitudes in predictable ways.⁷

Foreign Policy Orientation

Statements and conversation in the focus groups reveal a few key points about foreign policy orientation among residents in Dnipro and Kharkiv. First, people in general are extremely pragmatic in their understanding of Ukraine’s relationship with other countries; most did not seem to link foreign policy preferences with cultural identities or values (with some exceptions, discussed below). Second, while discussing this subject, people generally did not employ strict binary categories of pro-west/Europe versus pro-east/Russia. Instead, many comments across multiple focus groups emphasized either the utility of good relations with all countries, including Russia and Europe, or the need for Ukraine to remain independent of these two geopolitical poles. In sum, discussion on the topic of foreign relations was quite nuanced; focus group participants in Kharkiv and Dnipro think relatively deeply about how to understand Ukraine’s external relations.

Contrary to the points made above, I begin with a series of comments uttered by a middle-aged man in Kharkiv who grounds his political attitudes in terms of values, identity, and heritage. I quote this participant at length because his (somewhat inchoate) comments were so atypical. Most people, as can be observed in subsequent examples, expressed pragmatic concerns about Ukraine’s foreign policy orientation rather than connecting the issue to identitarian or cultural motivations. When asked about the policy of the Ukrainian government that banned Russian-language social media sites (V kontakte), the man makes clear that he opposes it while invoking his background:

Because we are all Slavic-oriented peoples, no matter how much some people protest, all of us have Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian roots, we are close here, all our parents.

⁷ See, for example, my article: "Who Supported Separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and Popular Opinion at the Start of the Ukraine Crisis" *Post-Soviet Affairs*, March, 2018.

He continues in this vein, mentioning that he resists integration with Europe:

And those people that say, yes, of course, undoubtedly everyone has their own opinion, but we need to orient ourselves to Europe...we need to orient ourselves without question. [sarcastically] But who made us? Our parents. And who were their ancestors? And their ancestors? There are orienting things.

Returning to the theme of banned social media, he makes clear that he sees Ukraine's political authorities as those who would separate him from his own cultural origins:

What was the motivation of those who banned all of this? Of course those who came to power were oriented toward a Ukrainian orientation, yes, and why that was so is obvious. I think that it relates to one part of the plan of psychological pressure on Slavic-oriented people. (FG8 _D; Kharkiv)

For other participants who expressed anti-European integration views, a commonly heard complaint was discomfort with Ukraine's status as a supplicant vis-à-vis Europe: "Ukraine reminds me of the person asking for alms, who asks "give me this, and this and that." While other countries say: "you are going to drink it all away." (P4, Dnipro-B). Participants also cited lack of respect toward Ukraine, not with regard to EU membership, but more generally as participants discussed Ukraine's new visa-free regime with the EU. One professional stated:

Visa-free travel, of course, is a nice thing in general...but it's not enough. It's just for tourism...The visa-free regime didn't do anything for Ukrainians, just economically. Concerning foreign policy, well no one from the government discusses the question of investment into the industry of Ukraine. There are investments in the Baltics, labor is a bit cheaper there; western capital is spread out, and it functions there. Why not in Ukraine?

He continues, emphasizing how Ukraine is treated:

Yes, it's a bit degrading, but we would be earning at least something. Now we don't earn anything, we just live off credit and that's it.... So we don't make anything and don't export anything. It's a very important question to make political relations with some businesses, not to just take money, but specifically to invest it into industry. (FG8 V_ IT ; Kharkiv)

This participant clearly prioritizes pragmatic considerations and also makes clear his feeling that Ukraine is being treated unequally compared to other European (post-Soviet?) states. Similarly, in one particular focus group in Dnipro, attitudes toward Europe appeared highly ambivalent. When asked directly about Ukraine's foreign policy and relations with Europe, participants said relations were "suitable" and "good." But when they were pressed on their attitudes toward the visa-free regime, most participants did not consider it an achievement: "Europe looks down on Ukraine. It doesn't know where it is located"; "Europe doesn't trust us"; and Europe views Ukraine as "cheap slave labor" (Dnipro-B) One member of this group, a man in his twenties,

elaborated on his disdain for the visa-free policy. He explained that the policy is superfluous for him because he doesn't have the money to go there or to obtain a biometric passport:

It's only 20-30 euros that they saved us, and all the other costs of going remain the same. The fact that they have opened this [visa-free regime] minus 20-30 euros is irrelevant to me. I flew to Poland on the visa-free regime and everything was exactly the same....

At another point in the discussion with this group, after several participants had finished explaining that they thought that Maidan was not a real grassroots phenomenon but a pretext for Poroshenko to come to power, they told the moderator that they supported Maidan's "demand" for integration with the EU in response to the moderator's direct question. (Dnipro-B) Thus, this group in particular demonstrated ambivalence in the way that they thought about Europe and Ukraine's relationship with Europe. (Dnipro-B)

In another focus group I conducted in Kharkiv, participants did not discuss foreign policy in grand geo-political terms and did not maintain consistent set of attitudes clustered at either end of the Europe versus Russia dichotomy. This group consisted of small business people and laborers who work at the *Barabashova Rynok*, an enormous bazaar selling retail and wholesale goods that attracts customers and sellers in both Russia and Ukraine. Participants reported that since the crisis began, their business has suffered drastically due to the interruption in relationships with suppliers in Russia, an increase in customs taxes, and the decline in customers from Russia making the trip across the border to purchase inexpensive goods. For these people, it makes sense to support continued trade relations with Russia over integration with the EU and they reiterated this point many times. At the same time, several of them were supportive of the Ukrainian government's goal to integrate with Europe.

Aligned with all states, including Russia and Europe

Other participants also wanted to ally with both Europe and Russia. One individual maintained this view but wanted to limit the relationship only to economic trade:

I believe you can trade with anyone, but only trade. You can even trade with Russia, but only on the level of selling something. Because that is also currency. But in political terms, the Western model is better. Because they are making slow reforms in the market sphere. (P1-V, Dnipro-B)

Similarly, most participants in the focus group of IT workers agreed that both sets of countries are useful. Ukraine was embedded in [trade and exchange] relationship with Russia and the relationship has continued even after EuroMaidan and the crisis. One participant, who was pro-EU and also pro-NATO, articulated this position:

Ukraine is agricultural and it should develop this sector but not just so that it exports raw materials, but finished products...Ukraine can sell its bread to... European countries and if we didn't have a conflict in the east, to Russia. Ukraine can sell anywhere, wherever there is demand for our products. Information technologies and agriculture are the two main parts of Ukraine's economy that it should focus on developing.

He also pointed out that Ukraine's authorities continue to benefit from Russia and are therefore hypocritical:

We ask from our European partners, (United States and European Union) to impose sanctions on our Eastern partner. At the same time, for some reason, we are not in a hurry to impose these sanctions....I can explain this with the idea that this situation is beneficial to certain people, including those who are in power. These sanctions are not beneficial for them because it is profitable for them to trade with the Russian Federation.... If we simply look at what goods we have on the shelves of our stores, we can see that they include Russian goods. That is, therefore, the European vector is external to us, but in fact it is not clear which direction to take. It reminds me of the fable about the the swan, the crab, and the pike. One of them pulls [the load] in one direction; another pulls [the load] in another direction. And again we are in a state of uncertainty.” (P5, FG8-IT Kharkiv)

Non-aligned foreign policy orientation

It was quite common for participants to express the idea that Ukraine should chart an independent course in its foreign relations; that it should be independent of both Europe and Russia. The popularity of this attitude among citizens in Kharkiv and Dnipro is suggested by the KIIS data that 33% of respondents in the east and south macro regions of Ukraine report that they favor non-alignment with either the EU or the Customs Union. See Figure 2. A typical statement of this position that we heard at the focus groups is captured in the exchange below:

MODERATOR: What should be Ukraine's foreign policy orientation? Europe? Russia? Multi-vector?

F: It should be its own....For this [IMF] tranche of 1 billion we are dictated political conditions, with whom we should be friends, what kind of internal policy to pursue....[the speaker opposes this.] That is why I think that the key moment is for Ukraine to have, as you said, its own foreign policy.

MODERATOR: And what should it be? It should be multi-vector?

I: Toward all.

F: Definitely multi-vector. And neutrality. Switzerland.

MODERATOR: Neutrality?

F: Switzerland, yes.

M: Ukraine is very good, but in comparison with other countries, roughly speaking....we have ...yes, cheap labor....construction-- we can win on this.

MODERATOR: Due to what?

M: ...some kind of production.

MODERATOR: By manufacturing new products?

M: Yes, some kind of manufacturing, yes. Maybe some furniture, for example. If we use the model of other countries, we would produce here to sell abroad...(FG6_B; Kharkiv)

A similar point that Ukraine should refrain from choosing between east and west was expressed when discussing the war: “Strong and flourishing Ukraine doesn't need either Russia nor Europe. Nobody.” (FG-B; Kharkiv). Again, when discussing NATO membership, some participants

articulated an analogous point—that Ukraine should remain independent, but not because it was a powerful state but because it was a weak one. One 27 year old woman supported “maintaining neutrality” due to Ukraine’s relative size and power among NATO member states:

The bad part of Ukraine being a part of any block is that we are a party that is weaker than others.... well, from many perspectives. ...[A] country like Ukraine will most likely be used as a resource.... For example, one of these problems is ecology. There is the Chernobyl zone in Ukraine, which is being discussed as a place for other countries to bring their waste. As a citizen of Ukraine, I really do not like this idea, because the territory of our country will be polluted. And now there are a number of such problems that will follow due to the fact that we will be a part of such block.” (FG8-1, Kharkiv)

Conversely, other participants backed Ukraine’s membership in NATO precisely because they understand it to be a weak state. According to this position, membership in a powerful military alliance would help Ukraine resist Russian aggression:

S: We need friends.

MODERATOR: Friends from where?

S: NATO, EU, those who can help with armed weapons. That’s why there’s no other way. Or we can be like North Korea, have an army but the people are in poverty. That may soon be waiting for us, if we won’t be in the bloc. (FG8 _ IT; Kharkiv)

For some participants, this imperative was paramount, leading them to change their political attitude toward one supporting NATO. For example, a man in his twenties explained why he shifted from an a-political or neutral position to a pro-Europe position.:

If I were asked the same question 10 years ago, even 8 years ago, I would be neutral, but now I will definitely answer this question. Yes, we must join NATO. Why? Because we were *not* a part of NATO, as a result, we paid for this with the war on our territory, captured territories, annexed Crimea.... So if we don’t want to lose any more territory....we need the support of those people who share our values. And NATO in this case, is the only organization that can help us solve this issue.” (FG8-5, Kharkiv)

The claim that NATO membership could have protected Ukraine was echoed in other focus groups.

Conclusion

Discussion about popular opinion in Ukraine tends to rely on binaries to describe Ukrainian political opinion. The language we use—*split, divided, halves, polarization*—much like the color-coded maps purportedly depicting the preferences or identities of the country’s electorate used to depict election results tends to reify the idea that there are two groups of voters with diametrically opposed opinions. As a shortcut, large swathes of people are labeled pro-Russia or pro-European. Certain opinion poll questions achieve the same effect by asking voters to choose between two alternatives, especially European integration versus Russia.

This brief analysis has shown first, that there are particular issues that unite rather than divide east and west Ukraine, namely, concern with the poor state of the economy and standard of living and the war. Future research will focus on how people attribute blame for these circumstances. The focus group discussions thus far suggest, however, that people held Poroshenko and other leaders responsible for the state of the economy since the crisis began in 2014. Second, my analysis of discussions concerning language issues and foreign policy are somewhat unexpected. Ukrainian versus Russian language issues does not seem to divide participants or rise to the level of grievance. With regard to foreign policy, focus group conversations indicate that people, on the whole, take a very pragmatic approach to understanding issues of trade and foreign relations. Most interestingly, they do not hew to expected stereotypes in discussing the issue of Europe versus Russia. While some individuals maintained consistently pro-Russia or pro-European position, many others did not—advocating instead that Ukraine either cultivate trade and good relations with all states (including both Russia and Europe) or that Ukraine remain independent of these two powerful poles.